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Ash begone! Your guide to smooth, glowing skin - Beauty Solutions

Julia Chance

Let's just call winter what it is: ash season. It's the time of year when the combination of cold weather and the things we do to feel warm work against us. "There's a drop in humidity during the winter, which means that the drier air extracts moisture from our skin," says Hema Sundaram, M.D., a dermatologist and the author of *Face Value* (Rodale), a beauty guide. Another reason our skin is so dry in the winter, says Jeanine Downie, a dermatologist in Montclair, New Jersey, is that "we have dry, forced hot-air heat in our homes and offices, which makes matters worse." And when it's cold, we enjoy taking long, hot showers and baths, but they remove the skin's natural oils. The result: parched, flaky skin that can itch to high heaven.

"It's important to switch to more hydrating products in the winter months, especially if you live in the Northeast and Midwest," says Susan Taylor, M.D., director of the Skin of Color Center in New York City. Two body lotions to turn to when you need some serious moisture: Curel Ultra Healing Daily Moisture Therapy Lotion and Jergens Ultra Healing Intense Moisture Therapy. But banishing ash and the discomfort associated with it requires more than just slathering on creams, oils or lotions, our specialists say. Instead they suggest starting your shower routine with a body-exfoliation treatment once or twice a week. Sloughing off dead-skin cells allows moisturizing creams and lotions to penetrate the skin more deeply, resulting in better hydration and less ash. We like L'Oreal Exfoliant New Skin Revealing Exfoliator.

In addition, all our doctors agree that adding moisture to your environment, with a humidifier or even by placing household plants around, is an effective skin saver.

WHEN IT'S MORE THAN DRY SKIN

Severe dry skin, accompanied by scaling, flaking and itching that no amount of moisturizing seems to relieve, could be a sign of a more serious problem. "You could have seborrheic dermatitis, psoriasis or eczema," Downie says. These conditions (often inherited) can be triggered by stress and are often worse in winter. (Eczema has also been linked to allergies and asthma.)

Don't try to remedy these problems yourself. "Visit a board-certified dermatologist if itching and flaking persist," Downie says. While these conditions cannot be cured, a doctor can prescribe a cortisone-based cream or lotion that will heal lesions or sores and soothe itching.

do's and don't's

DO:

☐ "Make sure to use superfatted soaps and cleaners (which include a high degree of moisturizing agents) to clean and impart moisture," Taylor says.

☐ Pat skin dry after bathing, and apply lotion, oil or cream while your body is still damp to lock in moisture.

☐ Mix a bit of massage oil into your favorite moisturizer to seal hydration.

DON'T:

☐ Scratch your skin raw. For persistent itching, use a 1-percent hydrocortisone cream, like Cortaid Intensive Therapy Moisturizing Cream, under or over an unscented lotion twice daily for no more than seven consecutive days.

☐ Lick your lips. It dries them out more. Keep them moist with a creamy protectant worn under lipstick.

☐ Take long, hot showers or baths. "The hotter the water, the more your skin will dry out," says Sundaram.

Ash Busters

Select products that contain the following ingredients to keep your skin smooth and flake-free:

* Glycerin, vitamin E and panthenol--humectants that draw and hold moisture to skin.

* Lactic, fruit and glycolic acids that exfoliate dead skin and promote cell renewal.

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